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ABSTRACT

This monograph presents a case study of a significant innovation in Malta: the establishment of an indigenous system of examinations at the secondary school and postsecondary levels. This is an example of a small state setting up its own end-of-cycle certification rather than using what is provided by metropolitan countries. The introductory section gives a brief overview of those features of the Maltese education systems that are the most relevant to the issue of examination, describing the methodological strategies employed in creating this account and discussing the origins and development of the present system of assessment. The second section discusses the evolution of Malta's examination system at the secondary and postsecondary levels, noting changes in the United Kingdom and their repercussions on Malta. The third section discusses the new examination system, focusing on the secondary education certificate examination and the matriculation certificate examination. The fourth section discusses organizational challenges. The fifth section examines challenges encountered (staffing partnerships, human resources, quality of staff, monitoring, local and international recognition, and financing). The sixth section examines the impact on the education system. A concluding section suggests that Malta's attempt to indigenize its secondary and postsecondary level examination system has paid off in educational terms. (Contains 35 references.) (SM)

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THE SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE AND MATRICULATION EXAMINATIONS IN MALTA: A CASE STUDY

Ronald G. Sultana

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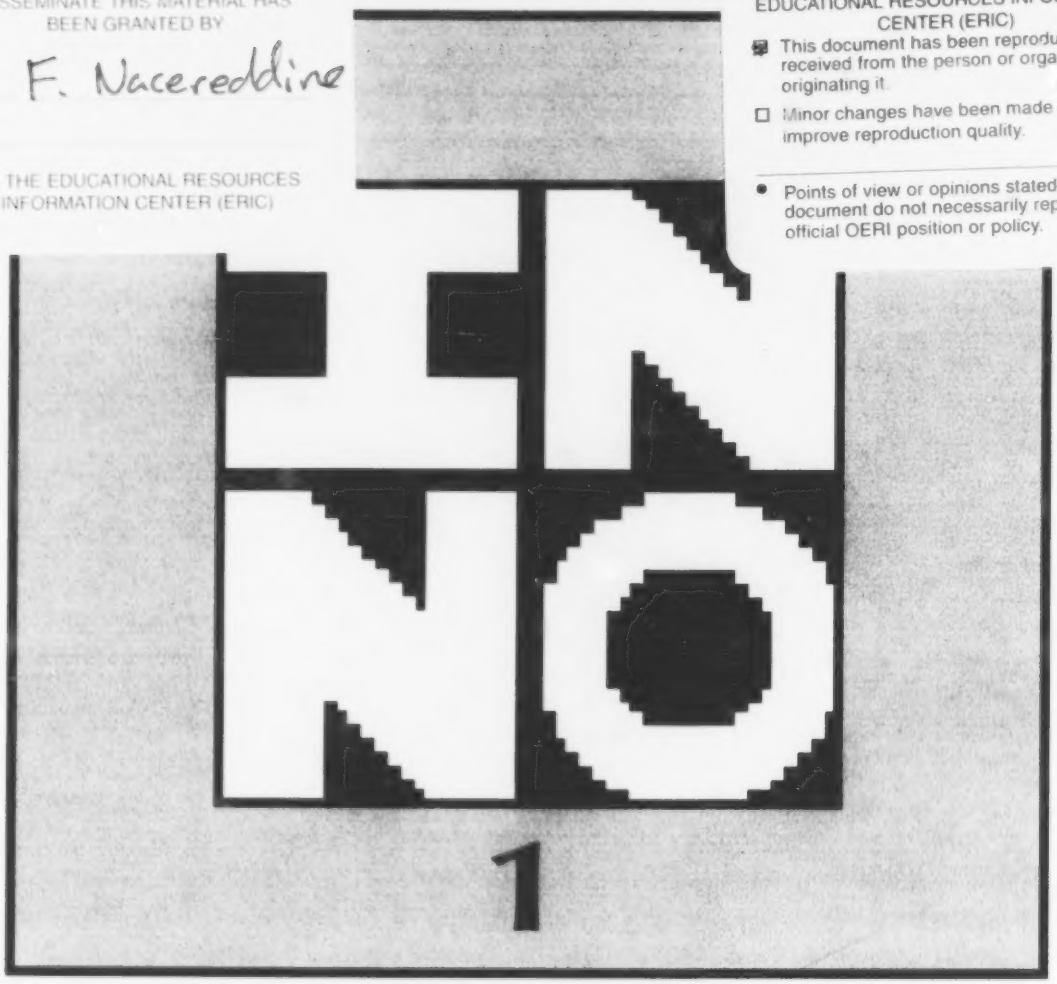

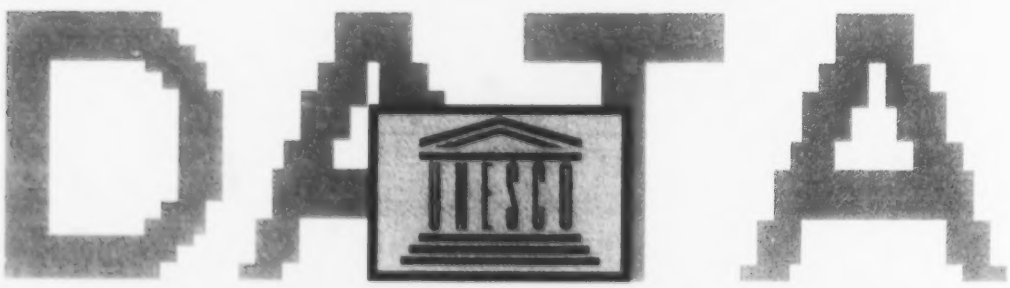

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Ronald G. Sultana

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Introduction

This monograph sets out to present a case study of a significant innovation in Malta,[1] the setting up of an indigenous system of examinations at the secondary-school and post-secondary-school levels. It is an important innovation not only in its own right, but also because it is a rare example of a small State setting up its own end-of-cycle certification, rather than using that provided by metropolitan countries such as the United Kingdom or France (Bray, 1998). First, a brief overview is given of those features of the Maltese education system which I consider to be the most relevant to the issue of examinations, since this is the backdrop against which current practices have to be located. This is followed by a description of the methodological strategies employed in writing this account. Details are then provided about the origins and development of the present system of assessment, its functioning and status, as well as about its impact on teaching and learning in Malta.

THE CONTEXT

Education in Malta came into its own in the post-war era (Sultana, 1992*a*; Zammit Mangion, 1992; Xerri, 1995), when compulsory schooling was introduced in 1946. Prior to that, educational provision had generally lagged behind when compared with developments in the United Kingdom and mainland Europe. An educational structure had gradually evolved by the middle of the nineteenth century, with a Director of Elementary Schools being appointed in 1844, pedagogy being taught at the University, and a number of influential education reports (e.g. the Storks Report, 1865; the Keenan Report, 1880) being commissioned by the British, who were to be Malta's colonial masters from 1800 to 1964. However, as has been argued in detail elsewhere (Sultana, 1992*a*), the local and traditional power blocs were not persuaded that their interests were best served by the extension of elementary education to all. The hegemonic Catholic Church, for instance, tended to equate British involvement in education with a presumed interest in proselytism. The British, for their part, were keen to anglicize and domesticate the islands by introducing the English language into Maltese schools. The indigenous professional classes were not particularly happy to see the British transform the contours of the local cultural scene by replacing the traditional language of culture, Italian, with English as the medium of instruction in elementary schools. This was considered a threat not only to the cultural capital that the professional classes had enjoyed for centuries before the arrival of the British, but also to

the Maltese people in general, whose budding sense of national identity was inextricably linked with the language question (Frendo, 1979). In addition, the local elite opposed any attempt by the British to introduce taxation to finance educational investment.

An important expansion of the educational services took place following the 1924 Compulsory School Attendance Act, but this applied only to those who actually began attending primary school and who, on admittance, were compelled to persevere until they were 14 years of age. Many parents clamouring to have their children admitted could not be accommodated, and it was not until 1947 that mass elementary schooling came into its own, a century after it had been introduced in most European countries, through the passing of the Compulsory Education Ordinance. Secondary schooling for all was introduced, initially on the British tripartite model, in 1970, and educational expansion in Malta is currently taking place in the post-secondary and higher-education sector, which now caters for 60% and 17% respectively of each age cohort.

Key features of the Maltese educational system, closely related to the issue of examinations, are as follows:

- **An overwhelming reliance on the United Kingdom** for educational models, policy-making strategies, textbooks and expertise.
- **A centralized state education system**, plagued by a heavy-handed bureaucracy that is constrained by early-twentieth-century civil service rules that include practices such as appointment to positions of responsibility on the basis of seniority rather than ability and merit (Darmanin, 1990; Farrugia, 1992; Fenech, 1994; Wain, 1991).
- **A stratified and selective state school system** (Sultana, 1997*a*), which practises streaming from the fourth year of primary schooling (8-year-olds) and assigns students on the basis of an 11-plus examination to academic 'junior lyceums', 'area secondaries' and 'opportunity centres'. Trade schools recruit students for technical education from the latter two sectors at the Form 4 (15-year-old) level. Students with disabilities are catered for in special schools, although there is a strong movement calling for mainstreaming. The state school system, which caters for 63,984 students, receives an average of 10% of the total national budget, and with 5,682 teachers is the largest employer on the islands (Central Office of Statistics, 1997).
- **Extensive educational services** that have had to expand at a very rapid rate as Malta integrated itself into the modern world economy in a relatively short period of time. This rapid expansion has put a severe strain on local human and material resources, to the extent that important and promising innovations have tended to come to nothing, owing to the country's inability to match widening provision with increased and continued resourcing. Because of these dynamics, depth often has to be sacrificed for

breadth, and this is as true of the present examination system as it is of the whole gamut of educational reforms of the 1970s (Sultana, 1997*b*).

- **A strong private school system**, catering for close to 30% of students (i.e. 25,355 pupils) and consisting of independent and Catholic church schools. The latter are heavily subsidized by the State, following an agreement in 1991 whereby church schools' expenses were to be met by the Government in return for the transfer of the Church's land to the State. Policies adopted in private schools severely constrain the latitude of the state education sector in developing its own educational vision. They have generally contributed to the intensification of inter- and intra-school streaming, selection and channelling strategies (Sultana, 1995) and to a culture of competitive achievement (Wain et al., 1995) that ranks testing and examination above the needs and development of the child (Sammut, 1995; Mansueto, 1997), and that directs the best material and human resources to the most achieving instead of those most in need (Farrugia, 1995).

METHODOLOGY

The following account of the local examination system at the secondary and post-secondary levels is based on documentary research and interviews with key personnel involved in the new assessment procedures in that sector. Minutes of meetings of the Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate Examinations Board, responsible for the running of the examinations, as well as those of the Board's various subcommittees, were analysed, as were all the newsletters and relevant literature issued by the Board and its Support Unit. Newspaper articles written between 1988 and 1998 relating to the examination system were also perused, together with the relevant Parliamentary Questions and minutes of meetings of the University Senate and the Malta Union of Teachers' Council. In-depth semi-structured interviews, generally lasting an hour, were held with several key people involved with the examinations. In order to ensure triangulation of data, the personnel interviewed included the Head of the Academic Division, Principal Subject Area Officers, the Principal Test Construction Officer, the University Registrar and representatives from the Education Division. Finally, evaluative material from reports prepared in the past decade is also referred to, particularly an earlier study by the present author (Sultana, 1996), as well as a study by Ventura (1998) in the context of a Commonwealth Secretariat comparative research project (Bray, 1998).[2]

The evolution of Malta's examination system

The key to understanding the reform of Malta's examination system at the secondary-school level (involving Fifth Form students aged 16) and at the post-secondary-school level (18-year-old students who have spent two years studying in the Sixth Form) is the shift from external (to the school in which a curriculum is taught) local examinations (Matriculation in the nineteenth century) to external foreign examinations (General Certificate of Education in the mid-twentieth century) and back to external local ones (1992). Both internal and external certification have been used at the same time in Malta. Heads of Schools have, for instance, provided a 'School Leaving Certificate' to those finishing their final compulsory year of schooling, testifying to the progress of a student during his or her school career. Even though countersigned by the Director of Education, this certificate has tended to carry little weight or prestige in the labour market, or in giving access to post-compulsory education. Much more important and influential have been external local and foreign examinations, a brief overview of which is given below.

In the nineteenth century and up to the middle of the twentieth century, the Malta Matriculation (i.e. 'maturity') examination regulated admission to the University of Malta. At the end of the nineteenth century, English School Certificate examinations run by the Universities of Oxford and London were introduced (*Daily Malta Chronicle*, 10 December 1901, p. 4–5). The new credentials could be used to gain access to government posts such as teaching, as well as occupations in private industry. However, Matriculation remained compulsory for University entrance until the 1950s, when the British examination system adopted the General Certificate of Education (GCE) at 'Ordinary' and 'Advanced' levels (Zammit Mangion, 1992). The British reform was adopted wholesale in Malta, so that the Matriculation examinations were all but phased out. Most Maltese students sat for either the Oxford or London University examinations. There are many reasons for the way in which foreign external examinations came to determine students' occupational and education futures. Not least among these are the colonial mentality that 'British is best' or, at any rate, 'better', and the general feeling that only those examinations set and marked abroad can be reliable and valid, given patronage and clientele networks that, although prevalent in most Mediterranean countries, have often been thought to be exacerbated in Malta owing to the archipelago's small size (Boissevain, 1965; Zammit, 1984).

The number of students taking the GCE examinations has increased steadily since the introduction of compulsory secondary education for all in 1970, to

the extent that around 4,000 sit their 'O' levels at the June session every year. Other types of examinations are available to Fifth Form students following technical options in trade schools and technical institutes, but student numbers here are much smaller.

CHANGES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND THEIR REPERCUSSIONS ON MALTA

The brief historical overview above highlighted the dependence of Malta's examination systems on those developed in the United Kingdom. The general feeling was that Malta did not have the personnel and resources to compete with the expertise available to the GCE Boards in terms of test design, setting of papers, marking and the evaluative research that ensured high standards. In addition, emigration as well as study abroad began to feature strongly in post-war Malta (Attard, 1994), and GCE 'O' and 'A' levels provided international currency which Malta Matriculation examinations could never hope to match. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the setting and marking of papers in faraway England gave GCE examinations a legitimacy which local examinations could not have, not only because of a prevalent colonial mentality, but also because it assuaged fears regarding the leakage of papers prior to examinations, or preferential marking in a context where everybody seems to know everybody else, and most people seem to be related to one other.

This does not mean, of course, that GCEs were perceived by the public in a wholly positive light. In the first instance, these examinations represented a veritable financial burden on families and the State, with each student sitting for between eight and ten subjects at 'O' level and paying over US$250, which represented well over a third, and in many cases over a half, of a family's monthly income. Moreover, GCEs constituted a substantial drain on the foreign currency that had to be paid, a sum that Zammit Mangion (1992, p. 354) puts at over US$2 million annually. In addition, strong nationalistic feelings in post-independence Malta, together with the Labour Government policy of winding down privileged relations with the United Kingdom (which included the closing down of the naval base, as well as overtures to the Maghreb countries to establish strong economic and cultural relations), led to frequent criticisms of cultural imperialism in the educational sector, with the GCE examinations being the most tangible proof of the island's dependence on its former colonial masters.

For a long time, however, the ability of the GCE examinations to respond to concerns about standards, international recognition and 'fair play' meant that the negative aspects associated with having foreign external examinations which were not sensitive to local realities or cultural sensibilities and aspira-

tions were, ultimately, endured. The United Kingdom's GCEs had such a strong legitimacy locally that, as Zammit Mangion (1992, p. 354) points out, no Government felt quite ready to tamper with them in any way, to the extent that the Maltese 'never fully exploited the facilities which the English examining boards would have been ready to provide to tailor their examinations (even through "special papers") to Maltese needs'.

The situation might have well continued in this manner had there not been a reform in the United Kingdom's examination system in the 1980s, under which the GCE examination was merged with the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) through the introduction of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). The CSE had been developed in the United Kingdom to cater for students with low academic ability, so that the top grade of a CSE examination was equivalent to the lowest GCE 'O' level pass mark. It had never been adopted in Malta, and therefore the earlier reforms in the United Kingdom had not had any repercussions on the local education system. However, the GCSE was predicated on a new set of criteria (which were not quite consonant with educational policy and practice in Malta). It thus shifted from 'norm' to 'criterion' referenced testing; it introduced coursework and teacher assessment as part of the examination system; it reformed syllabi and curricula to make them more responsive to perceived United Kingdom needs; and it ensured that each student would leave school with some kind of record of achievement (Broadfoot, 1986). Together with other assessment initiatives, which included records of achievement, graded assessments and modular accreditation systems, the GCSE represented a manifestation of a 'growing consensus that quite new principles need[ed] to be enshrined in certification procedures. The traditional examination emphasized recall of knowledge, external assessment, the ranking of pupils one against another and, perhaps most important of all, the provision of information suitable for selection' (Broadfoot, 1989, p. 85). New economic realities such as massive youth unemployment meant that most students were obliged to stay on longer at school, thus rendering the 16-plus examination less important, and making it crucial, for legitimization purposes, to develop assessment procedures which were more positive and educational in their orientation.

After studying the new examination system, the Maltese Department of Education decided not to adopt the GCSE mode, especially since United Kingdom examining boards opted to continue offering GCE examinations to overseas students and centres. For one thing, the new examinations were tailor-made to respond to British needs, and the weighting given to oral assessments and to coursework required extensive collaboration between local teachers and English examining boards, which was a difficult and complex new challenge to meet in view of the culture of centralization that then prevailed (Fenech, 1994). However, the fact that Malta could not accommodate United Kingdom reforms

highlighted the need for the island to develop its own system of examinations, one which reflected local education developments, including the promulgation of the Education Act 1988 and a National Minimum Curriculum for the various levels of education in subsequent years. In 1988 a board was set up informally at the University, with representatives of the academic staff and the Department of Education, and was given the task by the Rector of devising a different examination system, based on the International Baccalaureate philosophy. It worked in parallel with the official Matriculation Board until a year later, when the two boards were amalgamated to form a Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) Examinations Board, whose task was to develop an examination system that would, in due course, replace the foreign GCEs at both Ordinary and Advanced levels, and that reflected the shift in educational philosophy. The new examinations were therefore to:

- emphasize achievement rather than selection (a trend more generally promoted, for instance, by postponing streaming to the later years of primary school, and diminishing the exclusive, selective nature of the junior lyceums, Malta's academic secondary schools);
- give more importance to subjects that did not make up the core 'academic' curriculum;
- cater for a wider ability range of students (while the GCEs catered for about 20% of students, the new examinations were to cater for 80%);
- widen access to post-secondary and tertiary education to put Malta on a par with European levels (to the extent that the number of post-compulsory-age students rose to 60%, and the number of university students quadrupled, between 1987 and 1992).

The new examination system

The MATSEC Board, set up in 1989, is now responsible for two examinations – the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examination, aimed at 16-year-old students at the end of their compulsory schooling cycle in the Fifth Form; and the Matriculation Certificate examination, catering for Sixth Form students. These two examinations are described below.

THE SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION

Although the United Kingdom GCSE was not adopted locally, it would be fair to say that the 'spirit of GCSE' (Brown & Wilde, 1988) has been very much behind local initiatives, with a brochure advertising the SEC examination practically quoting GCSE documents when claiming that its philosophy is to reward candidates on the basis of 'what they know, what they understand, and what they are able to produce' (p. 5). Interviews with members of the various boards and committees associated with the new examination system revealed that the GCSE has been influential in terms not only of philosophical underpinnings, but also of the syllabi set and the structure of operations. As a member of the MATSEC Board pointed out, Malta does not have the human or material resources to carry out all the preparatory research and the constant evaluation of the system to ensure progress from year to year. Such progress could be ensured, however, by looking closely at a dynamic system and adapting it to local needs.

As with the GCSE, the SEC examinations differ from the previous GCE examinations in that they are not intended solely to give access to post-secondary courses, but rather to certify all students finishing the five-year secondary education course. Thus, while previously only about 20% of the total number of students in each age cohort used to sit for GCEs, the new SEC examination sets out to cater for about 80% of the cohort, and includes students from trade schools, who generally tended to finish eleven years of schooling without any formal credentialling since they were not prepared for GCEs and were therefore automatically excluded from the University track (Sultana 1992*a*).

Like the GCSE, the new examination grades students on a wider range of attainment (1–7), with the higher grades (1–5) being necessary for students to be eligible for Sixth Form, post-secondary and University entrance. Initially, the intention had been to have one 'graded' paper for each subject, with questions ranging in level of difficulty in order to cater for the higher-ability student. The 'new format' SEC examination opted, however, for

two two-hour papers in each subject. Paper 1, which is taken by all students, falls within the ability range of all candidates, and in most cases includes an aural/oral/practical/coursework component. Paper 2 entails a choice to reflect different abilities. Teachers, given their knowledge of students, are expected to be in a position to advise them whether to attempt Paper 2A or 2B.

Paper 2A comprises more demanding questions than those in Paper 1: it is designed for the more academically able candidates, and is targeted at those who expect high achievement and want to proceed to higher education in the subject taken. Paper 2B comprises less demanding questions than those in Paper 1: it is designed for the less academically able candidates, and is targeted at those who do not aspire to high grades.

Candidates have to indicate for which Paper 2 they wish to sit when they register for the SEC examination, and no change in the choice of paper is allowed after the registration period. Candidates sitting for Paper 1 and Paper 2A may qualify for grades 1–4. The results of candidates who do not obtain at least grade 4 remain unclassified (U). Candidates sitting for Paper 1 and Paper 2B may qualify for grades 4–7. The results of candidates who do not obtain at least grade 7 remain unclassified (U). Grades 1–5 give students access to the Sixth Form, while lower grades enable students to apply for courses in some post-secondary institutions, and employment in a range of occupations.

Interview material suggests that a key challenge for the MATSEC Board is to contest a view widely held by parents and students that grades 6 and 7 are worthless and equivalent to a failing mark. Furthermore, there has been criticism from the teachers' union that the new system, which requires candidates to declare in advance whether they intend to take Paper 2A or 2B, creates stress for students, parents and teachers alike. Both teachers and guidance personnel have expressed their dissatisfaction with the system of choice, and have generally not appreciated the added responsibility of advising students as to which paper they should take. Although the MATSEC Board noted this, it was decided that the choice between the two papers should stand, since 'it was felt that in the long run candidates were likely to get used to making an evaluation of their own abilities before applying for the examination in order to choose the paper most suitable for them' (Minute 96, meeting of 11 February 1994; Ventura & Murphy, 1998). In this connection, Darmanin (1995) has argued that the 'choice' between papers entraps students — as well as their teachers and parents — in making 'dispositional adjustments' according to beliefs held about 'ability'. Students labelled poor achievers will tend to self-select — and be channelled by parents and teachers — choosing the easier paper, irrespective of their real potential. This leads to a closing of options rather than to the intended opening up of opportunities.

The similarity between the SEC and the GCSE has been highlighted, and indeed in this as in other cases (Sultana, 1992*b*), educational reforms and inno-

vations in the United Kingdom tend to be adopted locally, even though economic and cultural realities do not coincide. Their adoption is not automatic or slavishly imitative; rather, different ideological appeals are made to justify and legitimize similar policies and practices. The MATSEC Board has strongly emphasized that the SEC examination dovetails with the National Minimum Curriculum introduced in Malta in 1988. As the brochure advertising the SEC examination states (p. 1):

The SEC complements the requirements of the NMC:
- by providing a common assessment system of an impartial standard;
- by supplying examinations appropriate for students with different abilities;
- by incorporating recent trends in educational thinking.

The MATSEC Board has been equally emphatic in pointing out that the SEC examination is characterized by the dominant European approach to education, which differentiates on the basis of positive achievement rather than failure, thus enabling all students to achieve according to their competence, and to have that achievement certified in a way that makes a difference in the job market. As a method of assessment, it promises to be appropriate for a wide ability range while at the same time preserving existing standards for the more academically able candidates.

The SEC examination is in fact considered to facilitate a mode of teaching which develops students' ability to 'recall information, to present knowledge in an organized manner, to use verbal and practical skills effectively, to investigate material, to use initiative in problem solving, to apply skills, knowledge and understanding, and to undertake curricular projects' (SEC brochure, p. 6). The change in the philosophy of examinations and in the approach to them can be seen in the importance that the SEC attaches to a practical component – project work and oral assessments in scientific and language studies respectively – and in the inclusion of work as part of the total SEC examination assessment, which contributes up to 15% of the total marks. The change is also signalled by the fact that teachers are responsible for assessing their own students on all three new dimensions, although their assessment is moderated by a Markers' Panel appointed by the University.

MATRICULATION CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION

The examination relevant to students completing their Sixth Form studies also features strongly in the reforms, reflecting a new conceptualization of education so that 'requirements for entry into the University [have been] adapted to conform with the new pattern of education that is being generally adopted in Europe and elsewhere at the post-secondary pre-tertiary level...This pattern

requires all students to show competence in a language, a human studies subject, a science subject and possibly a technology or applied arts subject, as well as evidence of aptitude to integrate the different subjects in as personal and creative a fashion as possible' (MATSEC Board Newsletter, No. 37, October 1994). This reflects Malta's current educational policy, as evident in the National Minimum Curriculum, which is based on the premise that individuals are more likely to develop into mature persons if their studies comprise subjects chosen from both the sciences and the humanities.

The key to the reforms at the Matriculation level is an understanding of the shift from an English-type to a continental-European-type baccalaureate and, more precisely, an International Baccalaureate-type baccalaureate. The former prevailed in Malta up to 1994, and was characterized by a 'specialization in depth' whereby pupils studied three or four subjects drawn from one of three groups, namely the humanities, the sciences and the social sciences (Husén et al., 1992, p. 237). These types of 'A' levels had been introduced into Malta in the late 1950s and, as in the United Kingdom, were regarded as standards of excellence, the foundation of university degree courses, and the best means of selection for higher education (Muscat, 1995). The English answer to the broader continental curriculum was the introduction, in 1989, of Advanced Supplementary examinations. These were to be taken in conjunction with 'A' levels, and required half the teaching and study time, though retaining the same level of difficulty and attainment. Students could replace one of their 'A' levels by two or more Advanced Supplementary subjects. This innovation was never imported into Malta, and, as Muscat (1995, p. 53) points out, the only effort to broaden the Sixth Form curriculum has been through the introduction of the interdisciplinary Systems of Knowledge.

The examination reforms at this level proposed a further broadening through the adoption of a system akin to that of the International Baccalaureate. Subjects at the Matriculation Certificate examination are taken at two levels, Advanced and Intermediate, in order to allow a certain degree of specialization in any one of the four areas into which the subjects have been grouped, even though the examination is to be regarded as a single entity. Candidates are required to take two subjects at Advanced Level and three at Intermediate Level, together with Systems of Knowledge, which was introduced in 1989 in order to increase students' cultural capital and to bring an interdisciplinary approach to learning. The Advanced Level Matriculation is equivalent to previous 'A' level examinations, while the Intermediate Level Matriculation requires about a third of the study time estimated to be necessary for reaching Advanced Level after the Secondary Education Certificate has been obtained. The overall grade (A, B or C) is based on performance in the examination as a whole.

Organizational structures

The new examinations are overseen by the MATSEC Examinations Board, set up in 1989 under the chairmanship of the University Rector and accountable to the University Senate. The Board is made up of three members from the University's academic staff appointed by the Senate, three members from the Department of Education, one member nominated by and from the members of the Private Schools' Association, and the University Registrar, who acts as Secretary. The Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) is represented by a member in an observer's capacity. The University, as the certificate-awarding body, remains the guarantor of the credibility of the new examination system, both nationally and internationally.

The brief for the Board was to develop a new examination system for students finishing their fifth year of secondary schooling, and for students finishing the two years of the Sixth Form. It was to set the policy regarding these examinations; to determine and implement measures with a view to ensuring that the new examinations reflected current developments in assessment techniques; to approve syllabi; to ensure validation and accreditation of the examinations, both locally and abroad, and to establish links with foreign boards; to award certificates to successful candidates; and to be responsible for the financial management of the examinations.

A *Support Unit* was set up as an executive body with an academic and administrative arm or division. Its main functions are to propose policy to the Board; to implement the policy established by the Board; to administer the examinations; to consider and submit to the Board the syllabi drawn up by the relevant Subject Panels; to make recommendations to the Board on the appointment of members of the different panels; and to guide the work of the panels with regard to syllabus writing, paper setting, marking, moderation and so on. It acts as the MATSEC Board's main point of contact with teachers, prospective candidates and the general public, and includes experts in test-construction techniques and in principles of examining, as well as a representative sample of experts in the disciplinary domains to be examined. The Support Unit also keeps in constant and close contact with external examining boards, especially from European countries which are considered to be in the forefront with regard to education.

Key Support Unit personnel include the Head of the Academic Division, the Co-ordinator of the Administrative Division, the Principal Test Construction Officer and the Principal Subject Area Officers (Arts and Science). In principle, the role of these officers has been very clearly defined, although role overload hampers the carrying out of a number of the tasks outlined on paper.

The Head of the Academic Division is, for instance, responsible for the overall monitoring of the examinations and the co-ordination of the work of the Principal Test Construction Officer (PTCO) and the two Principal Subject Area Officers (PSAOs) and their staff. The PTCO advises all panels on matters concerning assessment (content, objectives and techniques), thus ensuring that all examinations set by the Board reflect professional norms. The PTCO is expected to train staff, paper setters and markers in assessment techniques, collect and analyse data concerning the examinations, and initiate appropriate research. The PSAOs, for their part, are expected to initiate and develop curriculum development, and to co-ordinate the academic content of the examination process in the subjects falling within their competence. They direct the panels for each subject on all matters concerning syllabi, examinations and so on; they monitor meetings of panels; they liaise with teachers and personnel in the Education Division, and organize seminars and short programmes; and they collate and analyse information regarding curriculum development in the subjects within their area.

Subject Panels make up the third level of the pyramidal structure running the new examination system. They perform three roles: (i) devising syllabi; (ii) setting papers; and (iii) marking scripts for each subject or group of subjects offered by the Matriculation examination at Advanced and Intermediate Levels, and by the Secondary Education Certificate examination. Separate panels perform the three roles, although a person can belong to more than one of them. In this way, persons who by reason of kinship or involvement in private coaching are debarred from setting and marking papers may make a valid contribution to the devising of syllabi. All three panels are chaired by the same person in order to ensure continuity, and appointments are made for two years in the case of the Syllabus Panel, and for one year in the case of the Paper Setters' Panel and the Markers' Panel. The Subject Panels have embarked on a three-phase process, which included in the first instance the replication of existing syllabi for 1992 and 1993, the adaptation of existing syllabi for the following years, and the development of integrated curricula within six years.

A *Syllabus Panel* is responsible for curriculum development and the drawing up of syllabi. It is composed of a number of academic staff from the University, the Education Division and the Private Schools' Association, chosen for the expertise they can offer. Regulations for the Syllabus Panel specify that the number of academic staff should normally not exceed half the total number of members of the panels, and the number of Syllabus Panels chaired by members of the academic staff of the University should not exceed half the total number of panels. Persons on these panels are, ideally, in contact with curriculum development groups in other countries, and are able to cater for the widest ability range among students.

A *Paper Setters' Panel* is responsible for the preparation of the question papers and a marking scheme in a subject for each session of the examination. It is composed of at least two and at most three members, appointed by the University Council on the advice of the MATSEC Board and the Senate. Members of this panel need to have proven experience in this area and be familiar with the principles of test-construction. The *Markers' Panel* is responsible for the marking of the examination scripts according to a marking scheme agreed to by the Paper Setters' Panel, and follows a series of rules in order to ensure fairness and consistency. It is composed of at least three members, and is appointed by the University Council on the advice of the MATSEC Board. A number of rules ensure that the choice of members of the Paper Setters' and Markers' Panels does not in any way advantage any candidate sitting either the Matriculation examination or the SEC examination.

Challenges encountered

STAFFING PARTNERSHIPS

Unlike previous examination systems that prevailed in Malta, the Secondary Education Certificate and the Matriculation Certificate examinations place a premium, at least on paper, on a partnership between the University, the Division of Education (especially the Curriculum Development, Implementation and Review Department) and classroom teachers in both state and private schools. This is reflected in the composition of the Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate Examinations Board, which, as noted above, though chaired by the University Rector, is otherwise made up of an equal number of representatives from the Division and the University. The attempt to develop partnership is also evident in the fact that responsibility for the subject Syllabus Panels is generally shared equally by persons from the Division and the University.

These are significant developments, given that in most cases relations between University and Division staff have been marked by competition and mutual disregard rather more than by collaboration. Matriculation examinations, for instance, were previously set and marked by the Head of the respective subject department at the University, with no consultation with the officials of the Department of Education. GCEs were administered by the Department of Education and the Registrar of Examinations attached to that Department, with practically no involvement on the part of the University. One explanation for this mutual exclusion from similar, if not identical, concerns is that small States, by definition, cannot offer a wide range of prospects of promotion to positions of great responsibility, since these are limited in number (Farrugia, 1991, p. 276–77). Competition for scarce resources — which include status as well as material rewards — and multifunctionality (Farrugia & Attard, 1989), which often leads to claims that territorial expertise has been infringed, render collaboration rather more difficult than in larger social units.

The demands placed on local staff at all levels by the new national examinations have made collaboration essential, and indeed minutes of meetings of the MATSEC Examinations Board occasionally refer to ministerial appeals for strong working relationships between the Division and the University (e.g. Minute 37 of the meeting held on 19 November 1991). Interviews with members of the Board and the panels suggest, however, that this collaboration has not quite worked out to the extent planned. Most of the Education Division personnel interviewed felt that being under the aegis of the University, and

despite their strong representation in the official examination bodies, all they could do was to 'air their views', and that in many cases their opinions were in fact ignored. They generally presented the University as 'an empire' dominating most if not all aspects of the new examinations, and resented what was ultimately felt to be an 'impositional' rather than a collaborative structure. For their part, some University academic staff felt that the Education Division had never been enthusiastic about local examinations, had never quite identified with them and had expected them to fail. In addition, academic staff criticized the Education Division for functioning too much as a hierarchical bureaucracy, to the extent that instead of collaborating with practising teachers, they found themselves having to work with senior education officials, who, they felt, could not draw on direct contact with students and classrooms when they came to develop syllabi and set papers.

Teachers, for their part, generally felt that they had not been involved in this partnership with the University on an equal footing. Minutes of a meeting held on 25 July 1994 by a working group appointed by the MUT Council to study the new examinations noted, among other things, the lack of consultation by the MATSEC Board with student bodies, parents' representatives and the teaching profession generally. The group recommended that the MUT Council 'note the arrogance of the University authorities in deciding upon such educational matters affecting the teaching profession and the educational system on the assumption that they are not Union matters' (Minute 5a). Given that the MATSEC examinations are premised on an appreciation of the input that teachers can provide in the assessment of their own pupils, the rifts between the University on the one hand and the Department of Education and its teachers on the other represent a real obstacle to progress.

HUMAN RESOURCES

The running of examinations on a national scale has put a severe strain on the staff involved, whether with regard to the administration of the Examinations Board, the setting and marking of papers or the required evaluation of the whole process. As Bray and Packer (1993, p. 237) point out, most small States have very restricted human and material resources, but they have to respond with as varied a structure as countries with populations many times greater than their own to provide the multitude of educational services and facilities offered in those countries. Regardless of its size, and in relation to examinations, Malta has, *inter alia*, to cater for all the curriculum areas and subjects by setting syllabi and examination papers; draw on a relatively small pool of teachers to develop appropriate curricular material; choose paper setters and markers from that limited pool; administer the different phases of the exami-

nations on an annual basis; publish results; monitor the effectiveness, reliability and validity of the examinations; cater for the special needs of groups of students; handle requests for revisions of papers; provide supplementary examination sessions each year; and ensure that the public has the correct information about the examinations through the use of the media and through face-to-face meetings with interested parties. Therefore, it has to provide the same range of services as larger countries, but drawing on a population base that is far from being proportionally similar. The demands on financial and human resources are therefore proportionally more acute in small States, and this has implications for the quality of the services offered, as well as for the extent of implementation of the planned innovations.

While a number of new positions have been created — those of Principal Subject Area Officers (Arts and Science) — most of the personnel involved have taken on new responsibilities over and above the ones they already had. This applies equally to the members of the MATSEC Board and to teachers in schools, and the MUT has had to make representations in order to obtain extra remuneration for school-based staff involved in the new examinations.

As already noted, each subject to be examined is administered by three panels – one that develops syllabi, another that sets papers, and a third that is in charge of marking scripts. Paper setters and markers are difficult to find, in view of the extremely stringent criteria that have to be satisfied in order to ensure reliability, fairness and confidentiality. These criteria stipulate that, because of the close networks between people on the islands, paper setters and markers related to or who teach (or give private tuition to) candidates sitting the examination in question should be excluded from the tasks in question. The difficulty of finding staff meeting the criteria is especially acute in relation to subjects which are chosen by a small number of students, in which occasionally only their own teacher has the necessary expertise. Candidates sitting for examinations use an index number, and this is then translated into an office number by the MATSEC administrative staff. Although this system slows down the process considerably — the markers usually receive the scripts some ten days after the students have sat the last paper of the relevant examination — it ensures that only personnel at the central office know which number represents which candidate. Furthermore, it ensures that candidates do not approach markers to exert pressure and influence grading.

Partly for educational reasons, but also because of limited resources, teachers have responsibilities in assessing their own students. This is partly due to the fact that, as with the United Kingdom GCSE, there is an emphasis on developing integrated skills so that a student 'knows, understands and can do' (Brown & Wilde, 1988, p. 124). Emphasis is therefore placed on a practical component and project work in subjects such as the sciences and Systems of Knowledge, and an oral element in the assessment of language learning; and

here teachers assess their own students. Teacher involvement in assessment has been bitterly contested by the MUT on a number of grounds. While it has agreed with the educational purpose underpinning the innovation, it has insisted on the need for support staff and qualified technicians in laboratories and workshops to help teachers meet the new demands placed on them. In a series of press releases and directives (e.g. those of 3 March, 23 March and 31 October 1993), the MUT instructed teachers to disregard MATSEC Board circulars until the principle that teachers should be remunerated for the extra work that the new examinations entailed had been accepted. The issue was subsequently settled, and teachers are now key partners in the assessment of students (Ventura & Murphy, 1998).

QUALITY OF STAFF

The working group set up by the MATSEC Board in 1991 to study the personnel requirements and costings of the new examination system noted immediately that 'the present lack of professional expertise in the field of assessment presents a serious threat to the validity and accreditation of the examination', and therefore recommended that 'close linkages be established, as a matter of urgency, with a more professionally oriented examination body'. The lack of local expertise in the field of assessment led the working group to conclude that it was 'advisable to adopt and adapt models developed in other countries, rather than attempt to develop completely indigenous models', noting that access to British expertise and use of textbooks produced in the United Kingdom indicated that an adaptation of the GCSE-type examination would be the most feasible solution under the circumstances (Working Paper, May 1989, p. 2–3).

The question of the availability of local expertise in the running of the new examinations can be addressed by making a brief inventory of personnel with the relevant qualifications at the different levels outlined earlier. The MATSEC Board itself has two academic staff members with some formal training and many years' experience in assessment and examinations. The more expert and senior of these two is also the Principal Test Construction Officer in the Academic Division of the Support Unit. The other is the Head of the Academic Division. Both have access to foreign — mainly United Kingdom-based — experts in the field, and such contacts have been used formally and informally to resolve particularly challenging situations. In addition, both have drawn on international (and particularly United Kingdom) educational literature to adapt practices and policies to the local situation. This is especially true, for instance, of the GCSE guidelines and instructions for conducting examinations as well as for the marking procedures. In addition, personnel specialized in assessment

and examination techniques employed by the Division of Education have been consulted on a regular basis by the MATSEC Board, and have been co-opted as members of different subcommittees of the Board.

The Support Unit personnel have been recruited following calls for applications for positions, the latter having so far included those of Head of the Academic Division, Principal Test Construction Officer and Principal Subject Area Officers (Arts and Science). Appointments to these positions are made with the proviso that if the best applicant does not possess a postgraduate qualification relevant to the position applied for, he or she will be appointed to a Deputy or Assistant grade, leading to promotion after the appropriate qualifications have been obtained.

Seminars for teachers involved in different ways with the new examinations have been organized on a regular basis by the MATSEC Board in collaboration with the Education Division. The 'concentric circle' or 'ripple' strategy was generally adopted, with meetings being organized in different phases with Assistant Directors of Education, Principal Education Officers, Education Officers and Education Assistants, Heads of Schools, Guidance Teachers and Assistant Heads of Schools, followed by subject meetings for teachers. For instance, a major series of meetings involving about 1,000 teachers were held between 26 May and 8 July 1994. These were generally information-giving meetings rather than training programmes. While the Support Unit seems to have done a good job in using the media to inform the general public about the mechanics of the new examinations as well as the philosophy behind them, it has been less successful, owing to its administrative workload, in developing the human resources and skills necessary for the successful implementation of the new examination system.

Indeed, early on in the running of both the Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate examinations, differences were observed in the number of candidates awarded particular grades among the large-entry subjects (Minute 197, MATSEC Board meeting of 28 September 1992), and the need for greater expertise in educational assessment was noted. The Principal Test Construction Officer therefore meets the Markers' Panels regularly in order to train teachers in the use of set procedures and criteria for grading students' scripts. However, the general opinion of all those interviewed is that the greatest weakness of the new examinations is the lack of adequately trained personnel, to the extent that there is no serious monitoring of the system.

MONITORING

The charge of lack of monitoring is applicable to all levels (Ventura, 1998). Owing to the dearth of human resources, people involved with the MATSEC

examinations — ranging from the University Registrar to the personnel employed in the Support Unit — have seen their role expand to such an extent that they cannot afford the time to evaluate the new system. Moreover, the number of subjects offered at the SEC level has increased so rapidly and dramatically that work has multiplied without corresponding increases in human resources. The actual administration of the whole annual exercise is so time-consuming, and there is so little time between organization and implementation, that interviewees spoke of 'management by crisis' and of leading a 'hand-to-mouth existence', completely taken up by 'coping' and with no time for the academic development of those they should be training. This means that there are no clear lines of responsibility and accountability, since monitoring is practically impossible. Paper setters, for instance, have no clear criteria for deciding which questions are more difficult and which are less difficult, and placing them in Paper 2A or 2B of the SEC examination. Also, there is the general feeling that teachers involved in assessing coursework and projects as well as those involved in oral examinations have tended to give very high marks to their own students. In addition, there are differences in the way teachers process the oral examination, some spending much more time than others in interviewing students. The MUT, for instance, while understanding the educational value of teachers' input in the overall assessment exercise, has consistently argued for better training of staff so that the task is carried out in a uniform and professional manner.

LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

Despite the lack of formal monitoring of the new examination system and the problems caused by the dearth of human resources, the general impression among all persons interviewed, as well as among students, parents and teachers, is that the 'indigenization' of the examinations at the secondary and post-secondary levels has been relatively successful. This is quite an achievement when it is remembered that one private school, for instance, declared outright at the start of the reform that it would never trust an examination system as long as it was run by Maltese! Students are sitting for these examinations quite willingly, and the number of pupils opting to take foreign-based examinations has steadily decreased. The Education Division, having unofficially remained sceptical and adopted a non-committal attitude to the new examinations, has officially endorsed and adopted SEC syllabi.

There has been criticism in the press of this or that aspect of the system, but the most strident of this criticism has been about fees that had to be paid and mistakes in the publication of results, rather than about the philosophy under-

pinning the examinations, or their credibility. Media articles pointing out the need for more information about the MATSEC examinations to reach the public, or severely criticizing administrative mistakes, while frequent, have not really jeopardized the MATSEC examinations' credibility. That credibility has been reinforced by some studies carried out by the Principal Test Construction Officer, which show that students sitting for both local and foreign examinations in the same subject tend to do as well or as badly in both, which of course suggests that Maltese examinations are pegged to the same standard as the United Kingdom-based ones. Indeed, there is some evidence that, in some subjects at least, local examinations are of a higher standard and level of difficulty than, say, the United Kingdom ones. A sign of the public's general acceptance of the local examinations is that there was no protest at all when the University announced that only candidates with the new Matriculation Certificate would be eligible for entry to Faculties. Despite this, however, it must be noted that in the context of a small, post-colonial society, where anything that is local is considered to be necessarily sub-standard, the barometer of acceptance of indigenous examinations fluctuates with every mistake made by the MATSEC personnel. In the June 1998 'A' level and SEC sessions, for instance, seventy-four mistakes were identified by the MATSEC Board from a total of over 53,865 results issued (*Times* (Valletta), 19 September 1998, p. 9). This is nothing compared with the chaos caused by the far more serious mistakes by the Oxford and Cambridge Examinations and Assessment Council (*Observer* (London), 2 August 1998); and yet faith in the reliability of local examinations was severely challenged, to the extent that a resolution was passed by the MATSEC Board, under pressure from government, calling for collaboration with the EDEXCEL Foundation, the London-based institution that administers the Business and Technology Education Certificate and University of London GCSE and GCE examinations, in order to have external moderation of the whole assessment exercise.

The public's faith in the new system has ultimately survived because, as one interviewee suggested, the certificates 'do the trick', i.e. they give students access to further education and to employment. Nevertheless, the very people involved in seeing the reforms through are concerned about the extent to which educational goals are actually being achieved. In the words of a Department official, 'the public might be reassured, but the educationists are not'.

International recognition of the local examinations has been queried on several occasions, but, in actual fact, through equivalence agreements with the Council of Europe, UNESCO and similar organizations, local credentials are transferable abroad. Interviewees pointed out that proof of the reliability of the local examinations is the fact that Maltese students who go to study in foreign universities give a very good account of themselves.

FINANCING

The costs incurred in running the new examination system total over US$500,000. Student fees for sitting examinations represent the only source of finance, and the total amount of fees paid falls far short — by approximately US$126,000 — of the costs involved. This shortfall has so far been covered from the University budget. Attempts to increase examination fees to cover the deficit were abandoned after students protested, taking to the streets in great numbers (*Malta Independent*, 14 March 1993). The reduction of income subsequent to the lowering of fees meant that the financial resources required in order to support the planned expansion of the pool of human resources were not available.

An alternative mode of operation for the MATSEC examinations would entail having the Board function as an autonomous structure, independent of the ministerial prerogative to set fees, and thus be in a position to run the system in a financially self-sufficient manner. This proposal by a member of the MATSEC Board was never adopted, probably because it runs counter to the predominant culture in Malta, where the State is expected to bear in full the costs related to social services, or to heavily subsidize such services, including education.

Impact on the education system

There has so far been no full-scale evaluation of the effects and impact of the new examinations system on educational practice as a whole. However, a decade after the launch of the innovation, a series of studies have started shedding light on different aspects of both the SEC and the Matriculation examinations. A course leading to a master's degree in education, with specialization in assessment issues, was launched by the Faculty of Education in 1997, and several master's degree dissertations will soon be available, generating a database that is crucial to policy-makers.

Some of the existing data suggest that SEC examinations have become more accessible over the years, although accessibility has not reached the desired 80% of each age cohort. In this connection, there has been progress in such subjects as English language (where the figure was 39.8% in 1993, and 88.1% in 1997), mathematics (26.0% in 1993, compared with 77.3% in 1997) and physics (23.0% in 1993, as against 61.9% in 1997). This has not been achieved, however, at the expense of standards (Ventura and Murphy, 1998). Accessibility is not even, but rather is marked by clear gender and school-type patterns. More girls than boys sit the examinations, and the number of candidates from area secondary schools is small, and that from trade schools minimal.

We are not in a position to know whether teachers are adopting different pedagogical strategies anywhere near the extent to which it has been hoped they would. In this context, I will therefore report impressions garnered from personnel involved in running the SEC and Matriculation examinations, as well as general feedback that teachers, parents and students provided through letters they wrote to the press. Also, I will hypothesize about the probable impact that the new examinations have had and will have in the near future, given my familiarity with the educational culture prevailing on the islands.

With regard to the SEC examination, it seems that there have been important repercussions on educational practice in schools, with more importance and attention being given to coursework as a legitimate component in the continuous assessment of students. Also, emphasis has been placed on project and practical applied work in a system which is best described as being 'magisterial' in style, with lecturing and note-taking being the most common form of pedagogy. Interviews with members of the MATSEC Board indicated that, given the strength of the examination culture in Malta, where teachers teach — and are expected by students and parents to teach — with examinations in mind, a change in the mode of assessment has an important 'backwash' effect and influences teaching methodologies. Two examples of this can be given.

First, the SEC's emphasis on practical laboratory work has led to the establishment or better resourcing of laboratories in a number of local schools, given that logbooks detailing experiments make up part of the total assessment in science. Second, language teachers have had to accord more importance to oral and aural work, with some schools introducing 'spoken English' as a discrete slot in their timetables. Pedagogical experiments in one area, such as language teaching, have influenced the teaching styles adopted in other subjects, and the fact that the coursework contributes to the final assessment of students has placed teaching methodology at the centre of the debate on education. There is the hope that teachers will now be induced to give preference to modern and interactive methodologies in the classroom, although of course it will not be possible to indicate the extent to which this shift has taken place before full-scale evaluative research has been carried out.

Since syllabi are set locally, educationalists have been able to include elements of Maltese and Mediterranean culture and realities across most if not all subjects, and in some areas, such as environmental studies, social studies and history, the subject matter revolves almost entirely around Maltese concerns. This is crucially important not only for political and ideological reasons, but for educational ones as well. Students can more easily relate to the curriculum if this abounds with themes and concerns they encounter in everyday life, and learning is more likely to take place when there is a connection between schooling and students' frameworks of relevance.

The wider range of assessment techniques, including short-answer questions, structured questions, essays, practical tasks, an aural/oral component and an internally school-based component, ensures that different skills are accorded importance. In addition, the internally assessed school-based component encourages 'the setting of relevant tasks, allows the candidate to choose the best from his or her work, allows more direct guidance from the teacher, and enables the teacher to contribute to the process of assessment' (SEC brochure, p. 10). The new examinations have therefore presented teachers with a unique opportunity to fulfil one aspect of a professional role which has long been denied them.

An important regulation which represents a break with the past refers to the fact that 'only candidates who complete their studies in Form V or who have reached the age of 16 years by 31st December [of the year in which s/he sits the examination session] will be allowed to register for the Secondary Education Certificate Examination' (Regulation 6.1). One of the advantages of a locally controlled examination system has been the identification of strategies to counter educationally debilitating practices, such as the spacing out of examinations, starting from Form 4 and occasionally from Form 3, in order to ensure passes. As a newspaper editorial headed 'Examination mania', welcoming the new regulation, remarked:

The major preoccupation of many of our secondary school students on being promoted to Form IV is how many...examinations they are able to 'get out of the way' in order to have their year in Form V as plain-sailing as possible. They home in on five or six subjects, priming themselves up with extra doses of private lessons (in some cases from their own teachers at school), aided and abetted by their parents who are willing to pay what is necessary for their offspring to collect as many...passes, and at the highest marks possible, to ensure entry into the Sixth Form, and eventually to University, or to the labour market...The change in rules should bring back some sanity to secondary schools, both State and private, where teachers and students in the upper two forms — completely unmotivated because the passes have been obtained anyway — face serious disruption and are in effect under-utilizing, or rather wasting, the educational system's resources. (*Sunday Times* (Valletta), 26 February 1995, p. 14)

Another positive effect of the SEC examination has been the extension of the range of curriculum subjects offered to students. In principle, the MATSEC Board has to react to curricular initiatives in schools, so that if a new course of studies is offered to students in a particular school, the latter can ask the examining Board to prepare an SEC paper in that subject. Previously, schools devised their curricula and syllabi, not to mention teaching strategies, with an eye to GCE requirements. With the new system, schools can be much more proactive in the development of curricula, syllabi and pedagogy.

While there is still a definite reliance on the United Kingdom for textbooks, there has been a new phenomenon in the past few years, namely that of local educational authors and publishing entrepreneurs investing in the production of high-quality texts in a large number of curricular areas. Since these texts are tailored to SEC and Matriculation specifications and requirements, they are a valuable resource for teachers and students alike, and more of them are being published from year to year, to the extent that they now cover subjects such as sociology and philosophy, even though these are peripheral rather than core subjects, generally chosen by only a few students each year.

The new Matriculation examinations have impacted on the education system in other ways as well. It is clear, for instance, that attitudes towards the Sixth Form curriculum and examinations are changing. As the Headmaster of the state Sixth Form has noted:

It will no longer profit students to cram A-level studies, by means of private tuition, to take the examination before the end of the course. It will no longer be possible to specialize in three related subjects to the complete exclusion of all else. The broader curriculum will require a broader vision. It will also mean that the culture of 'getting rid' of parts of the curriculum as one goes along will have to stop. (Muscat, 1995, p. 53)

Another repercussion is that the new International Baccalaureate-type Matriculation examinations have a wider range of subject matter than the pre-

vious United Kingdom A-level-type examinations. This means that fewer hours are spent on subjects taken at the Intermediate Level, and this could have implications for those courses at University which assume that students have a certain depth and breadth of knowledge in the particular subject matter before they enter University.

Concluding remarks

While more systematic evaluation is required, Malta's attempt to indigenize its secondary-level and post-secondary-level examination system seems to have paid off in educational terms. Malta has not followed the example of the Caribbean Examinations Council or the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment by adopting or developing regional examination systems. This is largely due to the fact that geographical and cultural distances between it and Cyprus and Gibraltar, for instance, make such a venture complex and unlikely to prosper. Despite the constraints that size imposes, and the apparent lack of alternatives available to small island groups, Malta has succeeded, beyond the hopes and expectations of many on the islands, in setting up a promising and independent examination structure which has set in motion synergies affecting various aspects of the local education system. As we have seen, the new examinations have given Maltese policy-makers the opportunity to be more autonomous in establishing an organic and holistic vision for educational practice on the islands; they have encouraged the development of curricula and textbooks that take local culture and realities into account; they have expanded the professional roles of teachers, who are partners in the assessment of their own students; and they are likely to modify the traditional and deeply engrained pedagogical culture of magisterial lesson delivery. They have effectively put a stop to a massive annual haemorrhage of foreign currency that Malta could ill afford. They have, moreover, achieved a degree of credibility among parents, teachers, students and employers, and are exchangeable on the world market of credentials.

This is no mean achievement for a micro-island with limited human and material resources, and is a unique example, for States of Malta's size, of what appears to be a successful challenge to dependence on a metropolitan country. The key challenge remains that of strengthening the administrative and monitoring structure to ensure that both technical and non-technical issues in the management of quality are guaranteed.

Notes

1. Malta has a population of around 371,000 and a surface area of 316 square kilometres. It gained its political independence from the United Kingdom on 21 September 1964, and was declared a Republic on 13 December 1974. It has a gross national product of US$7,200 per capita, and an unemployment rate of 3.7%. Its UNDP Human Development Index is 0.887.

2. Thanks are due to the Commonwealth Secretariat for permission to use material from that project, which has here been extensively revised and updated.

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I N N O D A T A

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